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The Political and Military Role of the Lebanese Forces Militia

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An Intelligence Assessment

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The Political and Military Role of the Lebanese Forces Militia

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An Intelligence Assessment

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This paper was prepared by [redacted]
[redacted] the Office of Near Eastern and
South Asian Analysis. [redacted]

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The paper was coordinated with the Directorate of
Operations. [redacted]

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Comments and queries are welcome and may be
directed to the Chief, Arab-Israeli Division, on
[redacted]

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**The Political and Military
Role of the Lebanese
Forces Militia**

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Key Judgments

*Information available
as of 27 July 1983
was used in this report.*

The Christian Lebanese Forces militia seriously threatens Lebanese domestic stability and the extension of central government authority. Second only to the Army as an indigenous military force, the key objective of the 4,000-man militia is preservation of Christian Maronite hegemony in Lebanon's predominantly Muslim society. In our view, political support for President Amin Gemayel is more likely to evaporate because of the Lebanese Forces than because of any other single factor.

Relations between the government and the militia are constantly shifting. The assassination of President-elect and former Lebanese Forces Commander Bashir Gemayel and a rift—probably temporary—between the militia and Israel, its main benefactor, enabled the Lebanese Government earlier this year to make limited political gains at Lebanese Forces expense. Since then, the Lebanese Forces militia has taken advantage of Gemayel's preoccupation with the Lebanese-Israeli negotiations to resume its activist role.

The Lebanese Army is the only instrument of central government authority and is thus critical to government efforts to maintain public order. As the government attempts to extend its authority in territories vacated by foreign forces, it will have to contend with the efforts of the Lebanese Forces to subjugate the Druze, harass the Palestinians, and suppress the increasingly vocal Shia community. Gemayel will use the Army to stand between contending factions, but he will not want to use it to confront the militia. Direct confrontation could split the Army as occurred during the civil war. The Army's role, therefore, will be limited by the political deals the President can work out with factional leaders.

If the Army can check factional violence and reassure confessional groups—a less likely prospect—the justification for the Lebanese Forces will be greatly diminished. Only then would Gemayel attempt to weaken the militia, although the central government will not be strong enough to eliminate it for the near future. Unless the Lebanese Forces militia can be brought to heel, its actions will jeopardize US policy objectives of restoring the preeminence of central government authority in Lebanon.

The occupation of Lebanon by Syrian and Israeli troops has so limited government authority, however, that many factional leaders now believe de facto partition is inevitable and see little to be gained from cooperating with the government. The period following the redeployment of Israeli

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forces will be critical. Should the government arrange and enforce a truce between Druze and Christians, the ability of Lebanese Forces leaders to foment trouble and thereby justify their own and the Lebanese Forces existence will diminish. Government failure to establish its authority in the area, however, would harden the partition mentality and embolden the Lebanese Forces. The result is likely to be renewed civil war.

Under these circumstances, we expect the Lebanese Forces will move to consolidate control over traditional Christian areas, setting the stage for a Phalange-dominated ministate. Gemayel probably would then abandon efforts to reach new power-sharing arrangements with other religious groups and cast his lot with the militia, knowing that he would need its support to retain leadership.

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The Political and Military Role of the Lebanese Forces Militia

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In August 1976 the Lebanese Front, a loose coalition of the four major Christian political parties, formally established the "Unified Command of the Lebanese Forces" to coordinate the military operations of the parties' militias in their fight against the Palestine Liberation Organization and its leftist Lebanese allies. The parties' militias were unified in name only, however, and for several years remained subordinate to their parent groups.

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Bashir Gemayel, then commander of the Phalange Party militia, worked for the unification of the Christian militias and often used force to impose his leadership. By the end of 1980, the Lebanese Forces had a rudimentary general staff and a Command Council composed of representatives of each of the political parties, although Bashir had established Phalange predominance in the organization. At the time of the Israeli invasion in June 1982, Bashir was moving toward the realization of his objective, a conventional Christian army.

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The Lebanese Forces under Bashir's leadership became an assertive political force. Bashir instilled in his followers a militant philosophy that rejected the clan politics of previous generations in favor of a new political order that would not be hostage to confessional interests.¹ We believe he intended the Lebanese Forces to be his vehicle for long-term control of the Lebanese political system.

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The Lebanese Forces viewed Bashir Gemayel's election to the presidency in August 1982 as a guarantee of its legitimacy and predominance in Lebanese politics. Bashir's assassination in September and the

¹ There are more than a dozen recognized religious, or *confessional*, groups in Lebanon. The country's political structure, fashioned under the French mandate, apportions high-level political, military, and civil service positions among confessional groups, according to an unwritten National Covenant between leading Christian and Muslim politicians acknowledged in 1943. The Covenant is based on the 1932 census—the last taken in Lebanon—which showed a slight Christian majority. The population balance has shifted in favor of the Muslims, and their demands for more equitable power-sharing arrangements are fundamental causes of confessional conflict in contemporary Lebanon.

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Phalange Forces in East Beirut celebrate the election of Bashir Gemayel as President of Lebanon in August 1982.



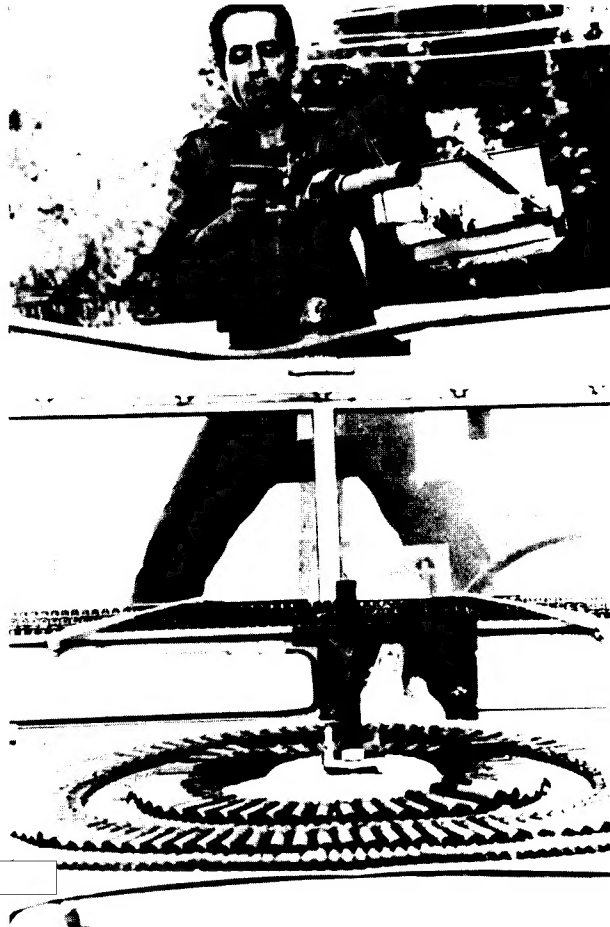
Lebanese Forces militiamen read news of Bashir Gemayel's assassination in September 1982.

Monday Morning

subsequent election of his brother Amin ushered in a period of uncertainty for the Lebanese Forces. According to US Embassy reports, the militia lost some of its elan and cohesion following Bashir's death. Although its leaders wanted to maintain their organization as a unique military force, the loss of Bashir's

Lebanese Forces Philosophy

The philosophy of the Lebanese Forces generally reflects the political ideology of Lebanon's Maronite Christians, particularly the Phalange Party. A strong opponent of pan-Arabism, the Phalange is determined to preserve Maronite hegemony to ensure that Lebanon will never be dominated by the Muslim majority or absorbed into a larger Arab state. The Phalange acknowledges Lebanon as an Arab country but believes its multisectarian population should serve as a bridge between the West and the Arab world and be neutral in Arab politics.



Christian combatant with crucifix and picture of the Madonna surrounded by ammunition on hood of jeep.

dynamic leadership led them into a series of compromises with the new central government. Since then, the Lebanese Forces has taken advantage of the President's preoccupation with the Lebanese-Israeli withdrawal negotiations to resume its activist role.

Military Objectives

At various times over the past four years, Lebanese Forces leaders have mentioned their objectives both publicly and privately. The most important military goals are:

- To recover formerly Christian villages in the Shuf and Alayh districts and establish Christian dominance in these areas.
- To attack and destroy Sulayman Franjiah's rival Christian militia in the north and bring Franjiah's stronghold under Phalange control. Former President Franjiah, a Syrian ally, is considered a traitor to Christian Lebanon, but the Lebanese Forces is unable to act against Franjiah until the Syrian troops protecting him withdraw.

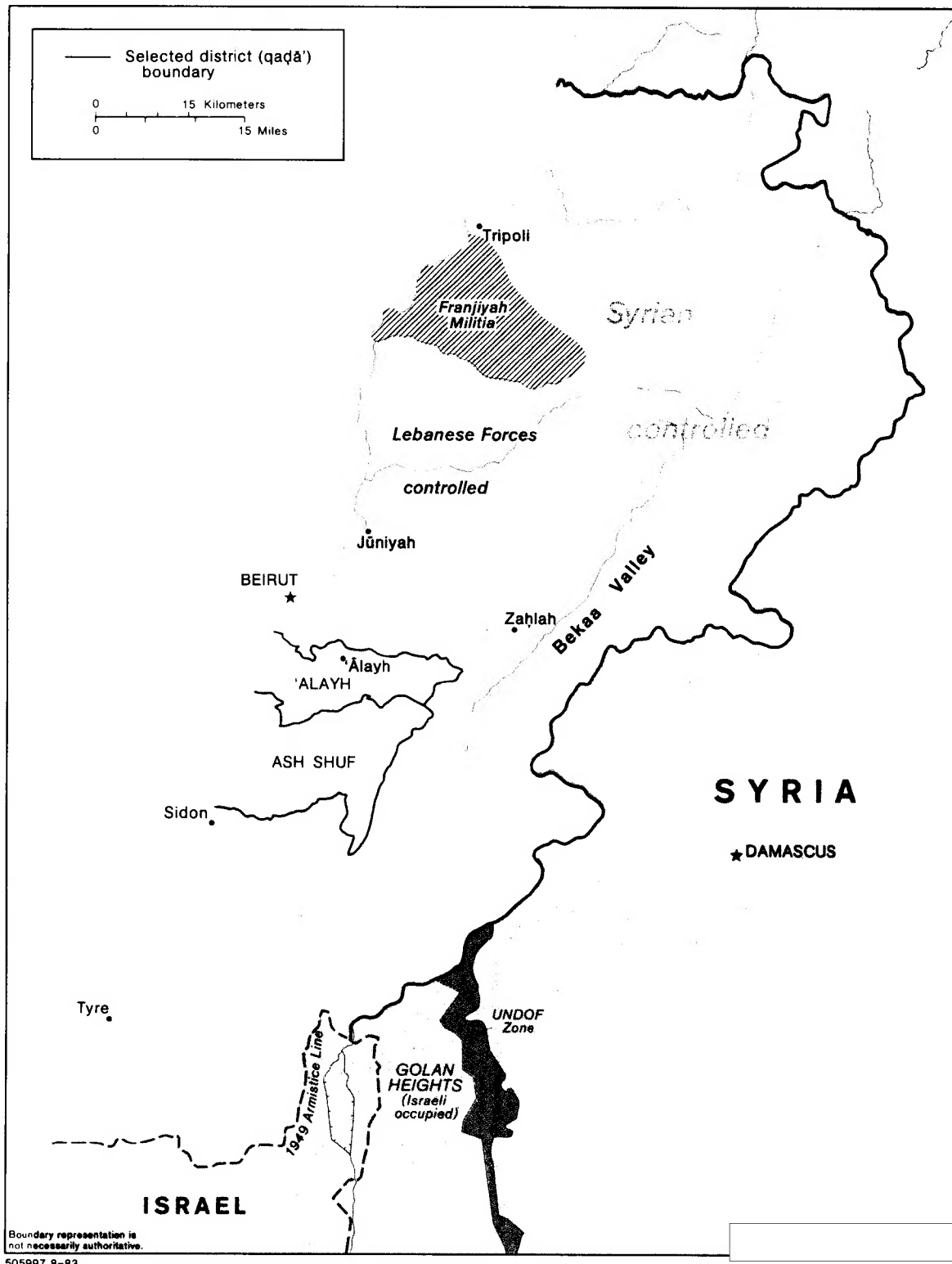
- To expand Lebanese Forces control at least as far south as the Awwali River.
- To kill or force out most Palestinian refugees in Lebanon.

With or without success, Lebanese Forces efforts disrupt Lebanese society and threaten central government authority.

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Figure 1
Lebanon: Controlled Areas



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Table 1
Lebanese Forces Command Council

Fadi Fram (President)	Phalange
Naum Farah	
Fuad Rukkuz	
Butrus Khawand	
Antoine Bradi	
Fuad Abu Nadir	
Charles Ghustin	National Liberal Party
Nabil Karam	
Eli Aswad	
Nuhad Shalut	
Samir Tawil	Tanzim
Georges Adwan	
Fawzi Mahfuz	
Nadim Shawayri	Guardians of the Cedars
Etienne Saqr	

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Organization of the Lebanese Forces

The Lebanese Forces militia is headed by a Command Council of 15 men. In principle the Command Council implements, through the commander, military and political decisions made by the coalition of Lebanese Christian parties.

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[redacted] Lebanese Forces headquarters performs all the staff functions of a regular army headquarters (see foldout at end of paper). In addition, there are staff positions responsible for various civilian functions, including external relations, finance, and the Phalange Party radio. These may be directly subordinate to the Command Council rather than to the Lebanese Forces commander. Subordinate to the general staff are the heads of the military branches—probably staff positions—and five regional commanders who apparently have line authority for military operations in their regions. [redacted]

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Below the regional command level, we believe the Lebanese Forces militia relies heavily upon the militias of the component parties of the Lebanese Front, especially the Phalange.²

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The Lebanese Forces militia is essentially a defensive organization, experienced and competent in urban warfare and house-to-house fighting, but inexperienced and untrained in conventional military tactics. Apart from Samir Ja'ja and a few other high-ranking Lebanese Forces officers, we believe most Lebanese Forces commanders do not have formal military training. [redacted]

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Lebanese Forces recruits in training at Christian security garrison.



Weekend warriors: Lebanese Forces irregulars drill on Sundays.



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Shifting Alliances

The relationship between the Lebanese Forces and the central government has changed with political developments since Amin Gemayel's election to the presidency in September 1982. [REDACTED]

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During Amin's first four months in office, we believe the militia took advantage of the President's apparent lack of assertiveness in order to stymie his initial efforts to extend government authority beyond West Beirut. The lack of an effective military counterweight to the Lebanese Forces and Israeli support for the militia left Amin with little leverage. The President's initial inability to deal effectively with the militia seriously damaged his credibility with conservative Muslims and leftist groups who initially were willing to cooperate with him. [REDACTED]

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Embassy reporting indicates that most militia leaders view Amin as representing old-style clan politics and accuse him of taking advantage of his family position for personal gain. [REDACTED]

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Amin has since proved more adept at handling the militia. In our judgment, he has learned to exploit the influence of his father, Pierre, over the militia leadership in general and Lebanese Forces Commander

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The Gemayels: Amin, Pierre, and Bashir.



Paris Match ©

Fadi Fram in particular. Pierre, as head of the Gemayel family and founder and head of the Phalange, commands respect and loyalty within the Lebanese Forces. Fram, moreover, is married to a member of the Gemayel family, a circumstance that reinforces his deference to the senior Gemayel. [redacted]

Amin himself is an experienced and able politician. Embassy reports detail Gemayel's careful backroom dealing with the Lebanese Forces that enabled him to deploy the Lebanese Army into the militia stronghold of East Beirut in February and to restore government control over the lucrative illegal ports that had been the main source of revenue for the militia. A Lebanese official close to the President told US Embassy officials that Gemayel hoped gradually to take over Lebanese Forces finances in a tactical move that would eventually enable the government to control the militia. [redacted]

According to US officials in Beirut, Amin's success in negotiating with the Lebanese Forces indicated that earlier reservations over what the militia perceived as his pro-Muslim attitudes had faded and that the Christian community and the Lebanese Forces appeared to have accepted Amin's policies. [redacted]

Amin was able to marshal moderate support during the Phalange Party Politburo elections held in June 1983 to narrowly block Lebanese Forces militant Samir Ja'ja from winning a seat in that body. Although many observers see this as a significant victory for the President, the closeness of the vote, in our view, illustrates the tenuous balance between the President and his opponents. [redacted]

A wary, but working relationship appears to have developed between Amin and Lebanese Forces leaders. We believe it is temporary, based in part on mutual need and on the recognition of a basic identity of interests—the removal of Syrian, Palestinian, and Israeli forces from Lebanon. Moreover, we believe militia leaders see no immediate alternative to Amin and realize he has US backing. There is no active Christian opposition to Amin or any organized effort to undermine his policies. [redacted]

Political Attitudes: The Lebanese Forces and the Muslims

The initial confidence of militia leaders in the ability of the Lebanese Forces militia to subordinate non-Christian factions to its rule has been tempered, in our view, as it realizes it cannot necessarily count on Israeli backing. As a result, militia leaders appear ready to reach a political accommodation with some religious and political factions. [redacted]

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Amin Gemayel with Druze leader Walid Junblatt: No meeting of minds.



Sygma ©

Phalange Party leader Pierre Gemayel and militia commander Fadi Fram have publicly called for cooperation between them and "responsible" Muslim leaders to dispel the belief that the Phalange and the Lebanese Forces were not interested in cooperating with other communities and were working only for their own objectives. US Embassy reports indicate, however, that these groups remain skeptical. The Lebanese Forces single-minded determination to dominate, if not permanently alter, Lebanon's political process is dramatically underlined by the militia's violent and bloody actions against Palestinians, Lebanese Druze, and other leftist groups. [REDACTED]

We believe the Lebanese Forces attitude toward the Shia community clearly has shifted over the past year. Amal, the most important Shia organization, sought to improve the Shias' economic and political lot by forging an opportunistic alliance with the Lebanese Forces. Its support for Bashir Gemayel's bid for the presidency contributed significantly to his electoral victory. [REDACTED]

With the departure of the PLO from Beirut and the weakening of its leftist allies, however, the Lebanese Forces militia is less in need of Shia support, and the cooperation that existed before the Israeli invasion has deteriorated. The US Embassy reports that the Shias distrust Christian intentions, and the Lebanese Forces militia, for its part, regards the Shias as untrustworthy, politically unreliable, and open to influence from revolutionary Iran. [REDACTED]

The conflict between the Maronites and the Druze, which goes back more than a century and a half, is not so much religious as a contest for territory. With the outbreak of the civil war, the Druze became the linchpin of the National Movement, a coalition of leftist factions allied with the PLO. The Israeli occupation of the Shuf and Alayh districts last summer forced the withdrawal of the Palestinian and Syrian protectors of the National Movement. [REDACTED]

Phalange efforts to restore ties with the Sunni elite are motivated, we believe, by a desire to restore the conservative balance in Lebanese politics. Old-line Sunni leaders recognize that by allying themselves with leftists and radicals they have "backed the wrong horse" during the last eight years and, in our judgment, are now prepared to cooperate with the government in anticipation of important political appointments. According to US officials, rank-and-file Sunnis are much less supportive of the government because they believe it represents Phalange and Lebanese Forces interests and therefore discriminates against them. This view is reinforced by the government's acquiescence to the continued existence of the Lebanese Forces, while it has disarmed all leftist fighting units within its reach. [REDACTED]

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The Druze handed the Christian militia a major military setback in late February by driving the Lebanese Forces out of the strategically important village of Alayh. The fighting also panicked many Christians into abandoning their homes in the area.

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President Reagan greets President Gemayel at White House.

AP ©

The Lebanese Forces and the Palestinians

A primary goal of the Lebanese Forces is the eradication of the PLO presence in Lebanon and the elimination of as many of the country's Palestinian residents as possible. The Lebanese Forces regard the bulk of Lebanon's 400,000 Palestinians as usurpers whose political activities and revolutionary goals triggered the civil war of 1975-76.

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The latest Lebanese Forces campaign against Palestinians began last September, following the assassination of Bashir Gemayel, with the massacre of Palestinians at the Sabra and Shatila refugee camps. Private comments made to US officials in Lebanon by numerous factional leaders make clear that all parties in Lebanon are aware of the militia's role in the massacre, but nearly all have refrained from public comment. According to US Embassy reports, this is partly out of fear of retribution by the Lebanese Forces, but also because many believe that salvaging Lebanon's unity is more important than attaching blame for the massacre.

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Since early February an organized campaign of violence against Palestinian civilians launched by the Lebanese Forces has been under way, and there have been numerous United Nations reports of evictions, kidnappings, and murders of Palestinians, especially in the south. One Embassy report points out that for many rightwing Christians, the plight of the Palestinians in Lebanon—even the massacre of last September—is not an aberration or an atrocity, but a justified act of revenge.

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Impact on US Interests

The actions of the Lebanese Forces could jeopardize US policy objectives in Lebanon aimed at restoring central government authority throughout the country. All political factions—including non-Phalange Christians—fear political and military domination by the powerful minority militia. General political support for Amin Gemayel is more likely to weaken, in our view, because of the continued existence and activities of the Lebanese Forces than because of any other single factor, including relations with Israel.

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Until the role of the Lebanese Forces is resolved and its activities constrained, other factions will attempt to rebuild their own military capabilities and form alliances that could lead Lebanon back into civil war. Domestic tranquillity depends in part upon President Gemayel's ability to bring the Lebanese Forces to heel. It is important for US credibility that a clearly preeminent central government emerge in Lebanon, backed by a credible army.

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Outlook

In our view, the future of the relationship between the government and the Lebanese Forces depends primarily on whether foreign forces withdraw from Lebanon. The occupation of Lebanon by Syrian and Israeli troops has so limited government authority that many factional leaders now believe de facto partition is

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inevitable and see little to be gained from cooperating with the government. This attitude is likely to harden following the redeployment of Israeli troops in the south, and renewed factional violence seems inevitable. []

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Under these circumstances, we expect the Lebanese Forces will move to consolidate its control over traditional Christian areas, setting the stage for a Phalange-dominated ministate. Amin will then be under less pressure to appease Druze, Shias, and Sunnis and will probably consolidate his political position with the Christians. His objectives and those of the Lebanese Forces would then more nearly coincide, and the central government would lose any prospect of obtaining the support and allegiance of Lebanon's non-Christian communities. []

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Paradoxically, if foreign forces withdraw, Lebanese Forces-government relations probably will become increasingly strained. We believe that Amin, to extend central government authority, will have to compromise with other confessional groups and oppose Lebanese Forces policies. []

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Near-Term Prospects. Lebanon's history of confessional strife guarantees that private militias will remain an important feature of Lebanese politics. For the near future, the Lebanese Forces will be the strongest of the militias, but its strength and influence will depend on the continued weakness of the Lebanese central government. []

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The Lebanese Army, the instrument and symbol of central government authority, will be the crucial factor in the government's ability to control the Lebanese Forces. Gemayel will use the Army to stand between contending factions, but he will not want to use it to confront the militia directly for fear the Army will dissolve along confessional lines as it did during the civil war. The effectiveness of the Army will depend on the political deals Gemayel and Army Commander Tannous can make with the Lebanese Forces and other militias to permit the Army to perform security duties in confessional areas. []

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Although the Lebanese Forces militia is probably aware of these constraints on government use of the Army, we believe militia interests would not be served

by provoking the Army. The military aims of the Lebanese Forces would be frustrated by the Army's presence, but in our judgment militia leaders probably still view the Christian-dominated Army as a political ally. In other words, if Army deployment becomes inevitable, Lebanese Forces leaders probably believe that other militias and confessional groups will be bigger losers than they as a result. []

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The withdrawal of Israeli troops from the Shuf and Alayh districts will be the critical test of this relationship. Should the government arrange and enforce a truce between Druze and Christians, the ability of Lebanese Forces leaders to foment trouble and thereby justify their own and the Lebanese Forces existence will diminish. Government failure to establish its authority in the area, however, will embolden the Lebanese Forces, and the prospects are excellent that it will reassert itself as an aggressive military and political factor. The likelihood that escalating violence would precipitate Syrian and possibly Israeli involvement then increases markedly. The result is likely to be renewed civil war. []

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If the government succeeds in the Shuf, it will continue to face challenges to its authority from the Lebanese Forces in other areas. The government will have to control Lebanese Forces efforts to harass and eradicate Palestinians, take revenge on Franjiyah and his followers, and suppress the increasingly vocal Shias if it is to achieve preeminence and prevent chaos. []

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Long-Term Prospects. Over time, the Lebanese Government probably will try to weaken the militia by dissolving it or by transforming it into a less threatening manifestation of Maronite interests. []

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• **Dissolution:** []

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— If the militia were dissolved, it would probably reemerge as a strictly Phalange militia, firmly under the control of the Phalange Party.

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- Militiamen loyal to the Shamuns would probably cleave to the National Liberal Party, while those loyal to the Tanzim Party and the Guardians of the Cedars would rejoin their parties. The result would be a significant weakening of the power of the Lebanese Forces and a consequent increase in the power of the central government.
 - *Incorporation into the Army:* Incorporating the Lebanese Forces as a distinct unit into the Army would be, we believe, politically disastrous.
 - Incorporation would reinforce Druze and Muslim fears that the Army is an instrument of Christian dominance, thereby weakening the Army's legitimacy.
 - The Army could accept individual militiamen—a policy that would help the military meet its manpower objectives while maintaining confessional balance. Incorporating Lebanese Forces officers would be more difficult, however, since the Army's officer corps already is heavily Christian. In addition, many Lebanese Forces officers probably would not meet Lebanese Army officer standards.
 - *National Guard:* A senior Lebanese Forces official suggested in October 1982 that the militia be retained as a regional "National Guard" stationed in Maronite Christian-dominated areas. Other religious groupings such as the Druze and the Shias would be allowed to maintain their militias in their regions.
 - This proposal would resolve one of the most difficult issues that faces the Lebanese Government—what to do with the numerous, mutually antagonistic militias. It would legally recognize the militias, however, and represent an important cession of central government authority. It could set the stage for a de facto sectarian partition of Lebanon.
 - *Border Guard:* Another alternative would be to form the Lebanese Forces into a border guard under the Surete Generale or the Internal Security Forces
- to prevent Palestinian infiltration from Syria. [redacted]
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- Such an arrangement would appease hardliners in the Lebanese Forces by keeping the organization intact but would ensure that the bulk of the force was away from Beirut.
 - Lebanese Forces units already share responsibility with the Lebanese Army for policing the frontier between Syrian forces and the Christian heartland in the north and east.
 - This solution might also be acceptable to other religious groups in Lebanon, who fear the Lebanese Forces will become a tool to suppress internal opposition to ensure Christian dominance. [redacted]
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- In our view, neither dissolution of the Lebanese Forces nor its incorporation into the Army are likely. The government probably will not be strong enough to eliminate the militia altogether, and political realities militate against incorporation. Far more likely, in our view, is the transformation of the Lebanese Forces. If the central government extends its control to the Lebanese borders, the border guard option is the most feasible. Should de facto partition occur, the Lebanese Forces will remain concentrated in Christian areas and probably become a "national guard." [redacted]
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- Whether or not Gemayel succeeds in transforming the militia, it will remain an important power base for Lebanese Christian extremists. The militia will continue to oppose and constrain government efforts to reach political agreements with the non-Christian communities in Lebanon. Any threat to the Christian community will encourage a resurgence of the Lebanese Forces. [redacted]
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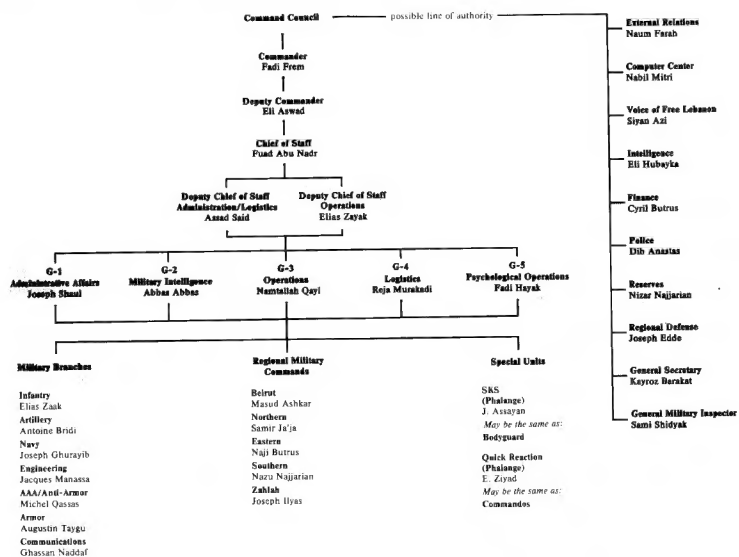
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Figure 3
Lebanese Forces Command Structure



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